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NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY REFORM: REBALANCING THE PRESIDENT'S AGENDA

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The common wisdom about presidential success in achieving major goals is simple: Focus on only one or at most two major initiatives. Presidents who try to accomplish too much risk accomplishing nothing, and multiple agenda items distract the team from "staying on message" providing ample opportunity for opponents to undermine the efforts.

While this may be true as a general rule, there is a risk that this strategy places an unnecessary and even dangerous limitation on presidential power, particularly in the area where that power may be greatest and most important—national security affairs. The current administration, while responding to an agenda that it largely inherited, appears to be charting a "low profile" course in its handling of national security affairs. Although understandable, this approach may have a very high price—failure to effect much-needed change.

The Context.

Prior to last year's presidential election, many experts thought the next president—even a Republican—would launch a new national security course for the United States. This would include a new National Security Strategy and, more ambitiously, a serious run at organizational reform. With wars in Iraq and Afghanistan not going particularly well and doubts swirling about current approaches to terrorism, debates abounded and included a number of recurring questions. Do we have the right strategy? Are we organized properly to conduct "whole of government" responses to security challenges? Are the processes for formulating and implementing strategy in need of repair? Are the various instruments of national power out of balance and, if so, what can and should be done to create or restore that balance?¹ Many thought the 2008 presidential election would help transform some of these debates from words into action, entailing change in policy, strategy, and perhaps even the basic organizational framework of national security affairs.

Two major shifts occurred that now make this change much less likely. First, the economic crisis reinforced the electorate's proclivity to focus on pocketbook issues. This was not a matter of choice. Second, the decision to make health care reform the

centerpiece of the new administration's policy agenda further locked the country into a heavily domestic focus. This was a matter of choice. The net result is an almost complete reversal of the momentum for meaningful change in national security strategy, structure, and process. The danger now is that the time for such significant change is quickly passing, and the administration may lose the opportunity to balance instruments of national power as a result of the imbalance between the domestic and international arenas.

The Dilemma.

One consequence of the limited agenda approach is that the administration has chosen not to lead with a new strategic vision. Instead, it continues to express differences with the Bush administration, and to engage in international affairs, but largely without any overarching context. So, for example, while it seeks to convince others that the United States will be more of a partner than in the recent past, it is much less clear what the United States intends to accomplish in partnership with others, as well as how and with what we intend to accomplish it. Crises in Iran and North Korea elicit on one hand a low-profile and on the other a high-profile approach. Decisions to draw down forces in Iraq and Afghanistan are accompanied by little expressed vision of what is to come other than a drawing down. There is, in short, quite a bit of "busyness" and not a lot of context for the actions and decisions we take.

If the game plan is to fight the domestic agenda first, and subsequently turn to the international agenda, problems loom. As we complete a QDR with no newly articulated NSS, the already pronounced imbalance between military and civilian capabilities and capacity will not be closed. Once that train moves out of the station, there will be no momentum for organizational reform. Even if, as we are now hearing, a new NSS will be released next year, decisions about the tools and how we can use them will already be made. Instead of shaping the tools on the basis of what we intend and need to do, we will once again risk bending what we do to accommodate what we have. And the military will continue to pay a huge price by being asked to do a lot of things for which it is only marginally trained and equipped to do. And all the talk of expanding civilian capabilities and capacity will remain just that – talk.

A Better Course of Action?

The President should articulate his vision for the NSS of the United States now. He should anchor that vision not just in the safety and security of U.S. citizens, but of people around the world whose collective security and abilities to tackle threats in their nascent stages on their own home field will make us all safer and more secure (and more prosperous too). The President should then argue that such an international approach to security requires appropriate instruments and a proper balance among them to not only fight and win our nation's wars, but to secure, hold, and build our nation's peace. That requires changing the way we are organized to design and

implement national security strategy. Such an effort might even begin with the creation of a new agency directly and solely responsible for national security strategy, with a Director whose primary responsibility would be to lead the formulation and implementation of national security strategy, and serve as the president's "auditor" for ensuring the development, articulation, and implementation of a true NSS, and the appropriate alignment among subordinate strategies such as the NMS and operations in the field.²

That train needs to be moving now or it will never leave the station. The President should seriously consider bucking the common wisdom and tackling the national security agenda head-on, even if simultaneously with his ambitious domestic agenda. Absent bold and early presidential leadership, change in national security policy and strategy is unlikely, and organizational reform impossible.

ENDNOTES

1. See the proceedings of the XIX Annual US Army War College Strategy Conference entitled "Rebalancing the Instruments of National Power" on our website at www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/conf/panels-media-2008.cfm.

2. This is one of the threads that run through the impressive report by PNSR as well as other recent studies of U.S. national security decisionmaking processes.

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